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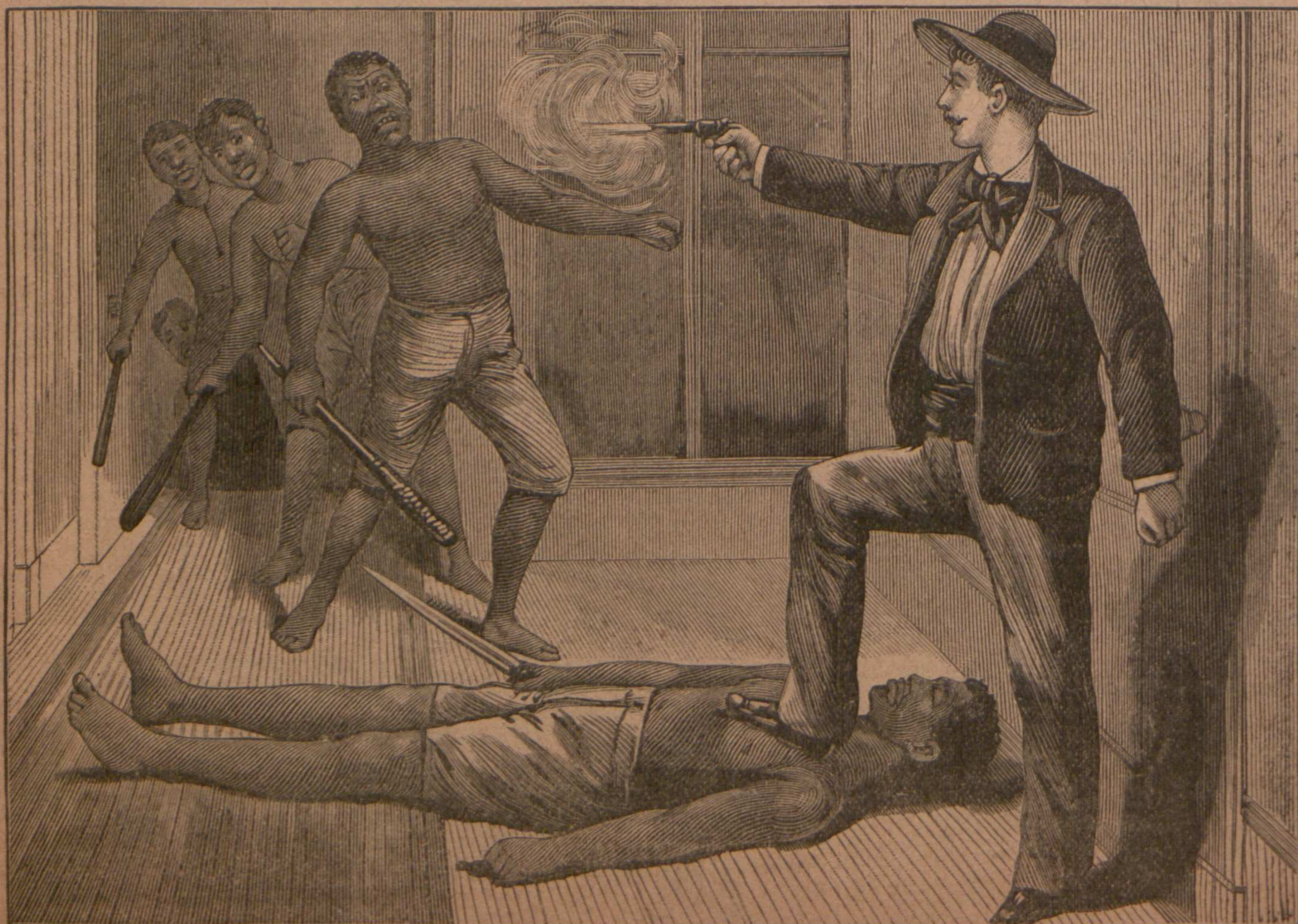
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TRIED FOR HIS LIFE; Or, The Chain of Guilt.

By LIEUTENANT MURRAY.



THE GIANT LEADER WAS DOWN, AND NO SOONER DID HIS LIEUTENANT SHOW HIMSELF THAN RUFUS FIRED

TRIED FOR HIS LIFE;

OR,

The Chain of Guilt.

By LIEUT. MURRAY.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLANTATION HOME.

Our story, in its opening chapters, takes us to that beautiful gem of American archipelagoes, the Island of Cuba.

The tranquil beauty of a tropical sunset lingered tenderly over bended palm and heavily laden cocoanut trees; the gentle sighs of the land breeze swept over the neighboring coffee plantations, fragrant with odors from the innumerable blossoms of the low latitudes. It was the one moment of twilight which precedes the falling curtain of night over a fairy-like landscape. Star after star sprang rapidly into place in the broad expanse of blue that hung over all, forming an arch of planetary splendor unequalled elsewhere. A few wax-lights were already sprinkled here and there in the rooms of the low, broad-spread country house that formed the domestic aspect of the scene, while the family group that sat beneath the ample piazza was hushed and silent under the softening influence of the hour.

The individuals referred to consisted of a lady and two gentlemen, each disposed in easy and graceful positions upon the bamboo seats. At the feet of the lady crouched, like a marble statue, a large sleepy-looking blood-hound.

Inez Ariata, as she sat half reclining there, was a being of surpassing loveliness, and the dreamy influence of the hour seemed well to suit her mood. She had just entered her twentieth year, but yet exhibited all the perfection of womanhood, in form and feature, which earlier ripens in her native clime than in the colder regions of the North.

The two members of the opposite sex, to whom we have referred, presented the most marked contrast to each other. The one dark and Spanish in every feature, the other with all the brightness of complexion and the clear blue eyes of the Saxon race. Neither could yet have passed his twenty-fifth year. Both were fine manly figures, and each, in his style, was decidedly handsome, while the very contrast between them, as they sat there so near together, was of mutual advantage in its picturesque effect.

The wealth of the Ariata family was proverbial in Cuba. Count Gomez Ariata, the father of Inez, had died two years previous to the opening of our story, leaving her an orphan, and under the charge of her aunt, his only surviving sister. The aunt, now a widow, with a son, Pedro Ariata, about the age of Inez, formed the family at Buena Vista, as the Ariata plantation was called.

Antonio de Mena had in appearance all the striking individuality of the Spanish race from which he sprang. He, too, had now lost both parents, and was the proprietor of a neighboring plantation. In point of worldly possessions he was almost equally fortunate with the Ariatas. He had also grown up from boyhood as the intimate friend and playmate of Inez, and was the firm friend and admitted confidant of her cousin, Pedro.

Rufus Bancroft, the third member of the group, and who sat between Inez Ariata and De Mena, was a true type of the young American student.

Within the broad hall which formed both entry and sitting-room of the plantation house was another group of persons, consisting of Donna Ariata, Pedro, her son, and a lady engaged in some crochet work of a light and graceful nature. Of Pedro Ariata little need be said in anticipation of the natural and gradual delineation of his character which the course of our story will discover, except that he was a free and generous-hearted young fellow of two-and-twenty, rather self-willed and impulsive, but with the true instincts of a gentleman.

Mabel Reed, companion, instructress, friend, for she was all these to both Inez and her aunt, had been an intimate friend of the family at Buena Vista for about six years. When Inez was fourteen years of age her governess, an excellent and efficient Frenchwoman, died, and at the suggestion of an American friend, who was visiting the master of Buena Vista at that period, a young American governess was procured to fill the vacant place, thus as was proposed, insuring the advantages of a knowledge of the English language, as well as some other accomplishments yet unacquired by the daughter of Signor Ariata. This purpose resulted in the engagement of Miss Reed, from New England, whose home relations were of a nature to necessitate some such occupation, for a period at least, and thus on her twentieth birthday, some six years previous to the opening of our story, she had nominally taken charge of Inez and her education, the matter of pupilage being equally shared by a sort of quasit concession between Inez and her cousin Pedro.

Both of her pupils had learned at the outset to respect, and then to love Mabel Reed. Pedro, at first, with all the boyish ardor of his nature, but this feeling had gradually ripened into a more fixed and settled affection, which, however, had never found expression in words, or, indeed, the least familiarity of conduct. On her part, it would be useless to deny that Mabel, at least in a degree, perceived the partiality of Pedro Ariata for herself, but realizing their relative situation, ages, everything, she was incapable of affording him any encouragement in such a sentiment, or at least under present circumstances. This had been the rule of conduct which she had laid out to follow, and thus far she had succeeded in its consistent pursuit.

It would have been foreign to her nature to outrage the confidence of Donna Ariata, his mother, by winning or encouraging her son's affection.

After a few words with Miss Reed and his mother, Pedro joined the two young men on the piazza, while Inez sought the society of the two ladies.

At this moment was heard the clatter of boots down the long perspective of the avenue which connected the house with the public road, and in a brief period there came in sight the figure of a small gray-haired man mounted upon a diminutive Cuban pony. He soon joined the others, and accepting a fresh cigar, lighted it, and then threw his wiry little figure at full length upon one of the long bamboo seats.

"Well, doctor," said Pedro, familiarly, "any news at Cereto?" the residence of the new-comer.

Doctor Finley was one of those jovial, shrewd, and humane Scotch physicians, who are somehow to be found in almost all countries. He had lived for years in Cuba, and was a professional who, ignoring much of the technicality of the schools, practiced upon the results of experience and the dictates of good common sense.

"Nothing very lively," responded the doctor, to Pedro's question. "I was within half a league of Buena Vista, convincing a patient that she should not require any medicine, and so I thought I'd just drop in upon you."

"A thousand welcomes," said Pedro,

"Look ye, Pedro, a thought strikes me," said the doctor.

"Does it hurt?" asked De Mena, lazily.

"No, I'm used to them," answered the doctor, dryly. "It might hurt where it hit for the first time."

"Well, well," said Pedro, "what is the idea? You and De Mena can't be together for a minute without sarcasm."

"Not a bit of it," replied the doctor. "I was hoping he might have an idea just to realize what it signifies."

"You are a sad wag, doctor," said Rufus Bancroft, joining in the conversation, while De Mena pretended to be half asleep.

After a chat with the ladies, the doctor accepted a goblet of claret and a second cigar, and galloped away toward Cereto.

CHAPTER II.

THE MIDNIGHT ATTACK.

On the evening of the next day, Inez and Rufus were walking among the fragrant lanes of the coffee plantation. The young American was saying how sadly he felt at

the summons which he had just received from his father to return at once to the North, and permitting his feelings to lead him farther than he had ever before gone in the expression of tender interest in herself.

Thus they wandered along, and he drew pictures for her of his far-off home; of his stern but just old father, and of the sainted mother, who had been taken from him while he was yet a child; of a half-sister, who had been to him a sort of mother, the issue of his father's first and early marriage, who being herself married and with children about her, though for some years a widow, was the female head of her father's house.

But Rufus Bancroft did not tell her of one other member of that household, his father's ward—Eleanor Livingston, a young and beautiful girl of nineteen, who, almost from her birth, had been affianced to him by the desire of the two fathers.

Eleanor, now an orphan, was a member of the household in Philadelphia, and, as we have said, the ward of his father.

The one moment of tropical twilight hung over them as the young American drew even closer to her side.

"How can I leave all this tropical glory, and you, who have turned the whole into an earthly paradise?"

He trembled as the low syllables escaped him. They were entirely unpremeditated, and he knew not how they would be received. Inez said nothing; her eyes sought the ground, but in a moment more she turned and softly laid her hand upon his shoulder, placing her other hand within his. No word! Indeed no word was needed. It would have seemed like profanation to Rufus Bancroft to have broken the silence. They stood thus for an instant, and then her glowing face was hidden upon his breast, while his arms for the first time encircled her form, and his lips were pressed to her forehead. No language was necessary to interpret hearts like theirs.

"Oh, Rufus!" it was the first time she had called him thus; "how very late it is getting," she suddenly exclaimed, "let us go back to the house."

At that moment, just as they turned to retrace their steps, De Mena came abruptly upon them from a side alley—he was hidden from their sight until he was quite upon them. Inez blushed like the scarlet roses at her feet, and wondered if it were possible that De Mena had witnessed the scene just described. Rufus Bancroft, however, saluted him politely, but not without a tinge of embarrassment, for he saw an expression on De Mena's face which he had never observed there before—indeed it was a look which the young American did not soon forget.

Of course both these men understood, to a certain extent, that they were rivals, yet until this day and this hour neither had ever received a single glance of favor above the other in their daily intercourse with Inez Ariata. Though she only glanced at De Mena's face, as they met thus suddenly, Inez did not fail to note the strange expression which she saw there, and of course believed that he must have been watching them. The very thought was sufficient to arouse her sense of dignity and to banish for the moment any partial sensitiveness arising from girlish modesty. Thus De Mena in his turn read an expression on her face of half anger, half defiance. In this somewhat complicated mood the three arrived at the piazza, where the reader first made their acquaintance.

On the following day Pedro obtained an interview with Mabel Reed, declared his love for her, and asked her to become his wife. The young lady hesitated somewhat before answering him, but finally told him that if he would make the same proposition to her in one year from that date she would consent to be his.

Little did the family at Buena Vista, as they separated that calm and beautiful night, expect to meet the fearful experience which was in store for them.

The moon had set, and it was a little after midnight when Rufus Bancroft, impelled by a strange uneasiness which he could neither explain nor control, left his room in a house scarcely half a mile from the Ariatas and turned his steps back toward the spot where he had so lately bidden Inez and the rest of the family a pleasant "good-night." His first purpose in returning was to seek

that side of the low-lying plantation house, where he knew the chamber of Inez to be, and after looking once even at the outside of the apartment which held the treasure of his heart, he would be content and return to rest for the night. Familiar with the side paths and all of the surroundings of Buena Vista, the young American did not approach the house by the main road and the open avenue, but came through the coffee plantation and by the very spot where he had pressed the form of the lovely Inez to his heart.

Scarcely had he got in sight of the dwelling when his ears were saluted by unusual sounds, which seemed to come from a thickly wooded portion of the grounds, and which he strove for some time in vain to account for. Finally he was satisfied it was the low conversation of a number of negroes. What could they be doing away from their huts at that time of night? he asked himself. Certainly there was something wrong, so he resolved to watch for further developments, withdrawing to the shelter of some neighboring trees so as not to be himself observed. The precaution was well taken, and none too soon, for from his covert he now observed a dozen negroes, led by a large, ugly-looking Congo, all creeping stealthily upon their hands and knees toward the house.

It was with some difficulty that Rufus could restrain himself, but he was naturally cool in moments of danger, and self-reliant and brave to the fullest degree. He observed that the leader of the blacks held in his hand a bright steel knife, while his followers all seemed to have bludgeons of heavy wood in their hands, but still it was difficult to exactly make out whether they were otherwise armed or not, in the dim starlight. He also approached, under cover, still nearer to the house, observing very closely every movement of those in front of him. He saw them pause for a moment, while the Congo man came back among them, and apparently reiterated some former direction, as he pointed to the house, and then putting his fingers significantly upon his lips again took the lead.

The first impulse of the young American was to rush among them, and seizing the leader give an alarm which should awake the inmates of the house, and put them on their guard against whatever might be the purpose of the invaders. But just at the moment that he was about to do so he espied, coming from another direction, a dozen more blacks, evidently in co-operation with those whom he had first discovered. As near as he could make out these were each armed with a club like the first gang, and were led by one who was some steps in advance of the rest who acted as lieutenant to the burly leader.

The sight of this addition to the numbers of the blacks caused him to pause and consider for a moment what was really best to be done. If he were to rush among them single-handed, they would doubtless overcome him easily, and he might not be able to render further service, whereas if he awaited his opportunity possibly he might be the means of saving the lives of those within the house. As he thus weighed the matter and reasoned with himself, he quietly loosened the revolver which he wore, for all whites carry arms among the plantations, and prepared himself for any emergency which should follow.

In the meantime the negroes had drawn nearer both to him and to the house, until both gangs uniting, took noiseless possession of the piazza, and Rufus saw a key introduced into the lock of the front door, which yielded to the efforts of the big Congo leader, and opened at once.

He could wait for no further developments, the time had come for him to act, and so forming his plan he glided to the rear of the house, and by repeated and heavy blows upon the door of the back entrance, strove to arouse the inmates before the negroes should be able to surprise them in their rooms. In his efforts at the door it suddenly and fortunately swung open, and thus enabled him to effect an entrance without immediately encountering the attacking party, among whom the loud noise he had made created a momentary confusion, while at the same time it served to awaken the sleeping family above. Rufus knew the house in every part, and quickly ascending the rear stairs, he sought the door of Inez's room.

He had noted well the gang of negroes before they entered the house, and was satisfied that none of them

were from the Ariata plantation, though some traitor among the slaves must have supplied the key which he had seen used by the leader.

He now discovered this large and powerful rascal making also for the chamber doors, where the ladies of Buena Vista slept, just as he reached the upper step of the rear stairs.

Hurried and anxious as he was, he listened for a moment and heard the low, vicious growl of the blood-hound which always slept inside of Inez's door, and said to himself:

"Thank Heaven! the dog is on the alert. He is equal to any one man, even though he be armed. The first scoundrel who enters there, will be siezed by the throat with a grip that does not uncloze until the victim dies!"

He took time to aim carefully, himself apparently quite unobserved, and fired a ball straight into the bare body of the Congo, just above the waist, and saw him fall like lead, just as his hand was on the chamber door.

Rufus sprang over the prostrate body, and placing his back to the door, faced the on-coming negroes, who were now hastening toward the fallen body of their burly leader.

But they saw that steady hand extended even in the dim starlight, which came in at the large entry window, knowing that a deadly revolver was aiming at them. They all hesitated, passing the word back for the lieutenant to come and give his orders.

He also had heard the pistol shot, but all had transpired so rapidly that he had not yet left the front room door, where, indeed, he had been posted by his leader for certain purposes.

He came hastening up the stairs in answer to the summons he received, but no sooner did he show himself in advance of the now shrinking negroes than Rufus Bancroft aimed carefully and fired; he could not afford to lose a single shot, all must tell. The new-comer staggered for a moment where he stood, and then recovering himself, rushed headlong toward the young American, who knowing he had wounded the man, resolved not to lose another shot on him, but stooping, quickly wrenched the knife from the dying grasp of the Congo, who lay scarcely breathing at his feet, and buried it to the very hilt in the bare breast of the second leader of the gang.

The lieutenant fell across the body of the Congo just as he brought his club, with a swinging blow, against Rufus Bancroft's side.

At the same instant, another pistol shot was fired from an open door, still nearer to the negroes who were huddled together in a mass at the head of the stairs, and two of them, evidently wounded by the same ball, tumbled down the whole distance to the piazza entrance. At this moment, also, Inez summoned courage to open her door, and the blood-hound, springing out, seemed to comprehend the whole business with human intelligence. He made one mad leap among the crowd of ruffians, and fixing his fangs upon the throat of one of them, threw him to the ground, and rolled with him down the steps where Pedro's shot had just sent two others. The surprise and repulse were complete.

With their two leaders lying dead or dying, and three of their comrades dangerously wounded, the negroes now make a rush to escape from the house, pausing only to disengage the grip of the hound from their comrades' throat, and to pick up and carry off the other two whom Pedro's shot had severely wounded.

The young Cuban followed them to the piazza, and gave them two more shots, one of which proved fatal, as the body was left at the head of the avenue. Many of those who escaped did so with deep bites from the pursuing blood-hound, who followed until called off by Pedro.

The greatest marvel of the whole affair, as was afterward remarked, was the wonderful rapidity with which all this strange and bloody work had been accomplished. Eight minutes had hardly elapsed between the moment when Rufus shot the Congo leader and the time when the last of the gang had disappeared at the end of the avenue of palms.

The overseer having made his appearance, the dead

bodies were removed so as not to outrage the feelings of the ladies.

The ladies, in the meantime, had clothed themselves in great haste, while in a state of sickening fear, and all had now assembled in the family room below. It is better to leave the appreciative reader to fill up the moments which immediately followed the reunion of the members of the excited household, and which were given to mutual congratulations and praise of the bravery and discretion of the young American. Rufus Bancroft told them of his first discovery of the rascals, and how he found himself for a while in a dilemma as to what was best to be done in order to alarm the inmates of the house, and finally the manner in which he had effected his entrance by the door in the rear.

Inez's quick eye now detected the pallor upon her lover's face, and an expression of inward pain, which he vainly strove to conceal. Pedro also now observed for the first time that Rufus was evidently ill, and that although no words of suffering escaped him, yet that he must have sustained some injury of a serious nature. In vain did the young American strive to make light of it; that stinging blow of the negro's club had struck him like a sledge hammer, and the truth was that he could hardly sustain an upright position. A faithful boy was dispatched on a pony for Doctor Finley, who came, as it would almost seem, on the wings of the wind, so promptly did he make his appearance.

"Hurt! hurt! who is hurt?" demanded the doctor, in his nervous and jerking style of speech when excited.

"Mr. Bancroft," they all answered in concert.

"Bless me, my dear boy, what is it?" continued the doctor looking him over hastily.

"Only a blow, doctor. We've had a scrimmage here, and one of the rascals has hit me a hard blow."

"Hard blow—hard," said the doctor, examining for himself, after pulling off the American's coat and vest.

"Bless me, why you've got a broken rib."

"I half suspected it," was the reply. "Well, doctor, fix me up the best you can, that is all."

"Is it dangerous, doctor?" whispered Inez.

"That remains to be seen."

"He must not move about, doctor," suggested Mabel Reed, who, always cool and self-possessed, took the initiative.

"No; if he can go to bed and lie there undisturbed and at once, I think we can bring him round after a while. He must be very quiet though."

"Let him go at once to my room," said Pedro. "Here, Rufus, lean on my arm, and see if we can get there over the stairs."

And so it was that Pedro's apartment, being in the most favorable condition and easily accessible, was selected for Rufus Bancroft's temporary home; and while he was being made comfortable there by the old housekeeper, Pedro told the doctor of the startling events of the night.

Of course the necessary stay of Rufus Bancroft at the house of the Ariatas was made delightful, notwithstanding the physical pain he endured, by the effort of Inez to minister to even his most trifling wants and desires. It also rendered necessary the postponement of the period selected for his departure home. This had by chance already been postponed for one week, in order to meet the sailing day of the vessel in which he had taken passage. As Mabel Reed had proposed to avail herself of his protection and company on the home voyage, she also deferred her departure until he should be sufficiently recovered to travel.

The government having being made acquainted with the attempt of the marauders upon the Ariata family, thoroughly investigated the whole matter, and found that the two negroes who had been shot by Rufus Bancroft, and the one whom Pedro had sent to his long home, were members of a famous band, which had been a long time organized, and which had operated in various parts of the island in a similar manner, living upon robberies. The leader of the whole gang, only a portion of which came that night to Buena Vista, was the intelligent and dangerous Congo, whom Rufus had shot.

Antonio De Mena secretly cursed the fortune which had brought his rival to the defense of Inez on that eventful night.

"Curse him! He was to have been on shipboard a week ago, in which case this triumph would have been spared me. I know Inez's romantic disposition, and if she did not love the fellow before, she will be devoted to him now."

Of course when he came on the following morning to the house and heard the report of what had occurred, he pretended great admiration for the gallant young American, but to a keen observer, like Doctor Finley, he could not so disguise his sentiments as not to be partially betrayed by the working of his expressive countenance.

Some time elapsed, and finally the invalid had so far recovered that he could spend the hours of the day and evening upon the piazza, where we first introduced the reader to the *dramatis personæ* of our story. Here their former associations were revived. Inez sat at the harp, and Mabel Reed now and then sang and played within.

The doctor came over oftener than ever, and De Mena did not wholly absent himself from the family group. All felt that the pleasant party was soon to be broken up, as Rufus had announced that he had just received a letter imperative in character, and that he must sail in the next ship which left the port of Havana for the North. When the young American made this announcement a slight pallor crept over Inez's face, and there was just a perceptible tremor of her eyelids as she leaned forward and patted the head of her faithful blood-hound.

De Mena was present, and noted with a quick glance the effect of the announcement upon Inez. He struggled with himself for self-possession, and muttered: "I bide my time." Doctor Finley pleaded with his patient to take one more week for thorough recuperation, but without avail.

Before the close of the following day, Mabel Reed and Rufus Bancroft had embarked for their northern homes. Pedro and Inez both bade them good-by at Buena Vista, for certain reasons, but the doctor accompanied them to the ship's side, passing a basket on board full of little delicacies for them both at sea.

CHAPTER III.

THE BOLT FALLS.

After a pleasant and quick passage from Havana to New York, young Bancroft and Miss Reed arrived safely in their native land, and here separating, the former proceeded south to his home in Philadelphia, and the latter north to her New England birthplace, Boston.

Of course Rufus Bancroft's debut at his home was an embarrassing one, and to his sensitive mind extremely trying—a fact which the reader, who knows his Cuban relations, can easily understand. Yet in the hurry of first meeting, though it was impossible for him to appear quite natural and like his old self, neither his sister nor his father observed any special difference which could lead to a remark on their part. The father immersed in absorbing business transactions, had little time, and to speak frankly, less taste, for domestic affairs, and thus Rufus had scarcely met him and exchanged a half-dozen words before he was summoned away to his counting-house in the business part of the city.

But there was one in that household who was not so easily deceived—one whose sincere affection for the returned wanderer was such as to sharpen her perceptions of magnetic power. She saw a change in Rufus—not in any outward exhibition of feeling, for in their intercourse he was the same handsome, genial, kind-spoken, thoughtful person he would always be to her; but still her intuition told her, through the simple interpretation of her heart, that a change had taken place in him.

"It is so pleasant, Rufus," she said, "to see you back again, and your health so entirely restored. Do you know that we were all more anxious about you than we dared to express?"

"I was not really ill, Eleanor; only fashionably so—too sick to study, but just well enough to play; that was it."

"It is quite admissible to make light of it now, but at the time you went away you were sadly out of sorts."

Eleanor Livingston was very much, in disposition and character, like Mabel Reed. She was not impulsive, not demonstrative, but her feelings were all the deeper because they were so much inward in their operation. She was very calm, very lady-like, refined in every thought and every action, and most sincerely devoted in her heart to Rufus.

Mrs. Hurd, Rufus' married sister, who had charge of Herman Bancroft's domestic establishments, bade Jarvey, a sort of servant of all work, who had been in the family for some years, to pay particular attention to his young master, and to do all in his power for his comfort.

This Jarvey, a middle-aged man, was a character in his way, and though eccentric to a degree, was yet tolerated in the family for certain good traits, and because he took special good care to make himself useful to Mr. Bancroft. This was partly from policy on the part of the servant, and partly because there was something in the characters of the two which made them agree particularly well with each other. This Jarvey would submit to the most trying moods of his master, and to be found fault with in the most unreasonable manner by Mr. Bancroft, and seem to rather like the treatment, to judge by his secret smile behind his master's back. But from any other member of the household he could not patiently receive the least reproof, however well-merited, without anger. Rufus observed that one habit which Jarvey had always indulged in to a certain extent, had grown upon him—this was an inclination for spirituous liquors. Though the man never got intoxicated, in the common acceptance of the term, still he drank a great deal of spirits in the course of the twenty-four hours, and his personal appearance even began to evince the fact.

Jarvey had been reprimanded for this indulgence by Rufus before he left home on his West Indian voyage, and the servant was quite angry about it, but on the second day after his return this excessive indulgence was so manifest that his young master took him on one side and told him that it would no longer be tolerated, and that unless he reformed in this respect he should certainly be discharged from the family service. This enraged Jarvey and planted a seed of bitterness in his breast against Rufus, over which he seemed to brood with intense bitterness and a revengeful spirit. The servant's mind was in just that weak condition that leads to a tenacious holding to some one idea which becomes intensified and of mammoth proportions, whether important or otherwise. So he came to regard his young master as a sort of natural enemy, determined upon ruining him, and mumbled to himself that he "wished he had died away down in them Ingy Islands."

Mr. Bancroft was the head of the firm of Bancroft and Houston, a house which for forty years had been engaged in a highly successful East India trade, and from which Mr. Bancroft had designed retiring during the present year. The closing up of this long partnership had necessitated a reviewal of accounts, and hence his present confinement. It was not until the close of the second week, therefore, after the return of Rufus, that his father found time to sit down in his small private reading-room or library and send for his son to arrange certain personal affairs.

"Ah, my son," said the father, as Rufus entered the apartment, "sit down—sit down, I wish to talk with you. The trip seems to have entirely recuperated your health."

"Yes, sir. I am quite well now."

"Found plenty of pleasant people down yonder, eh?"

"Oh, yes, very agreeable and hospitable."

"That was a pretty severe episode, that night attack, eh? Well I'm glad you got off so safely, though it hardly pays to risk one's life for people we know so little about."

"Ah, but they had been very kind to me."

"No doubt. Well, I'm glad you are well out of it."

"Thank you, sir. It was pretty critical."

"Now, Rufus, about your marriage."

"Can't we delay that matter, sir?"

"Delay it! delay it! What for?" asked Mr. Bancroft, frowning a little.

"Well, you see, sir, I have never spoken to Eleanor about marriage, and it seems a little awkward. Perhaps we may not exactly suit each other."

"Suit! suit! What are you talking about? Don't you know that my old friend and classmate, Col. Livingston, and myself settled this matter twenty years ago?"

"A man's or a woman's settlement for life is certainly something upon which they should be consulted," said Rufus.

"Consulted! Here's rank rebellion! here's gratitude!" said Mr Bancroft, growing more excited.

"I have always respected your wishes and directions, sir, but in this matter you will certainly bear with me, and permit me to have some voice in the business."

"Rufus!"

"Well, sir."

"What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing, sir. I only desire to choose for myself the companion with whom I am to pass my life."

"Choose! choose her yourself! Do you mean to tell me you don't intend to marry Eleanor Livingston?"

"I fear, in this respect, father, I cannot comply with your wishes," was the respectful answer.

"Then you are no son of mine! Look ye, Rufus, are you listening?"

"Yes, sir."

"My will is made, and it leaves to you, to your married sister and her children, my entire property, with the exception of a few trifling legacies——"

"Ah, sir," interrupted the son, deprecatingly, "need we speak of this matter?"

"Don't interrupt me, sir! I say my will is made, and that it is favorable to you, as I always intended to make it, but if you balk me as regards this marriage with Eleanor, I will go to my lawyer at once and make a new will, cutting you off without a dollar. That is my decision!"

"I am sorry that you should threaten me in that manner," said Rufus.

"Then why do you not comply with what you know to be my wishes?"

"I cannot."

"Very well," said the angry man, in a loud voice; "I will give you one week to make up your mind, and at its close, unless you have fully agreed to this proposed marriage, my purpose for these twenty years or more, that will shall be changed, and we part forever! This is Saturday; next Saturday shall decide this matter at once and forever!"

"But, my dear sir——"

"There, leave me," interrupted Mr. Bancroft, "I expect Houston," and he turned his back on his son as he pointed imperiously to the door.

"Will you not hear me, sir?"

"Not one word."

"This ends all, then?"

"If you so choose," was the stern and bitter answer of the unreasonable and enraged merchant.

As Rufus passed out of the room, he came full upon Jarvey, and so abruptly as to nearly tumble over the fellow, who, on his part, pretended to be picking up some trifle from the entry carpet. He appeared not a little confused, however, and Rufus, without permitting the matter to weigh upon his mind at all, thought that he must have been listening to the conversation between his father and himself. In a moment afterward, as he came down to the foot of the stairs, he passed Mr. Houston, his father's partner, who had the entree of the house at all times, and without formality. A bare word of recognition passed between them as they met.

Having occasion to pass his father's door again, about ten minutes later, Rufus was surprised to see Mr. Houston still in the entry, and apparently engaged in earnest conversation with Jarvey, the two separating instantly as he approached.

"What in the world could there be in common between Jarvey and Mr. Houston?" thought he, as he went on to his own room. "Perhaps he has been telling Houston about the old gentleman's squabble with me. Well, I do not care," and he entered his chamber, and, tossing out

the contents of his traveling trunks, began to arrange his clothing in a more convenient and proper manner.

Among other things he found that ugly looking knife which he had taken from the leader of the robbers at Buena Vista on that terrible night, and which served him so well in the attack of the second desperado. The sight of the weapon recalled a flood of incidents, and observing that it had never been cleaned since its fearful use, he rang his bell for Jarvey and told him to wash it carefully and bring it back to him, telling the man, carelessly, enough of its history to account for it being in his possession. The general story of the night attack he had already heard, for such matters fly from mouth to mouth in a domestic household, and become more than a seven days' wonder.

As the servant went out of his young master's room he left the door ajar, and Rufus heard him telling Mr. Houston, who, having left his father's private room, was once more in the entry and on his way down stairs, that:

"This is the knife young master killed them robbers with, away down in the Ingy Islands."

"A nasty weapon."

"Isn't it, though."

"And sharp as a razor."

"Just what I said."

"What are you going to do with it, Jarvey?" asked Mr. Houston, as he took and examined the knife.

"Clean it up for him."

"And then hang it up as a trophy, I suppose, over the mantel-piece," he continued.

"Well, that's queer," said Jarvey. "How did you know? It's just what Master Rufus told me to do."

"They would give something for it at the museum," said Mr. Houston, carelessly.

Going directly down stairs, the partner passed out of the front door just as Rufus closed his own.

CHAPTER IV.

A FOUL MURDER!

As to that week of grace granted by his father to Rufus, it amounted to nothing; his mind was already made up, he should brave the consequences—his father's anger, disinheritance, everything. The only doubt in his mind was as to his duty to Eleanor, and how he ought to conduct himself toward her in this singular state of affairs. Should he open his whole heart to her, would it be proper and delicate to do this, would it be fair to force such a trial upon her? He knew, as we have already shown, that she loved him, just as well as though she had told him so. He sat reasoning with himself thus for a long time, until at last he resolved to write her a confidential letter, and frankly tell her everything, without reserve.

In the meantime the week accorded to Rufus was at its close—it was already Friday.

That day at dinner Mr. Bancroft seemed more absent and annoyed than usual, and to the inquiries of his daughter, who noticed his peculiar manner, he replied that his business accounts were very perplexing, and that he had no previous idea of their condition, having trusted that part of the business solely to Houston, and that he did not know where they should come out of the complication in the end.

It was nine o'clock on the following morning when Rufus, Eleanor, and Mrs. Hurd, with two of the eldest children, met as usual in the breakfast-room. Rufus was manifestly pale and uncomfortable. This was the critical Saturday! Mr. Bancroft, the soul of punctuality, not being present, his daughter sent the maid who waited on the table to call him. In a moment after the girl came rushing into the room, white as a sheet, and stared her mistress wildly in the face while she pointed up stairs.

She was so overcome that she could not utter even a syllable.

Rufus, Eleanor, and Mrs. Hurd rushed up stairs together and into Mr. Bancroft's room, where the sight that met their horrified gaze caused the daughter to faint and fall heavily upon the floor, while Eleanor trembled so that she could not stand, but sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands, while Rufus, approaching the bed, exclaimed:

"Great Heaven! What is this?"

There lay, upon the white sheet, his dead father, as pale as the linen itself, where it was not discolored by the bright spots caused by the life-current as it had oozed away into a pool at the side of the bed. It was a ghastly sight, the eyes and mouth wide open, and the head hanging to one side. He had been murdered in the night! There was the wound, just over the heart. One broad, deep stab! There was no second wound visible—it was not required. Rufus, pale but cool, put his hand upon his father's brow—it was as cold as ice. He had been dead for hours, only the murderer could say how long.

The terrified household quickly assembled, and Mrs. Hurd being attended to by Eleanor and her maid, Rufus first sent Jarvey for the chief of police, and then for Mr. Houston and the family physician, for although the latter could do no good, still it seemed natural to call him in on so trying an occasion.

"He must have died instantly and without a groan," said the physician. "The weapon pierced his very heart, and must have been used by a strong and intelligent hand."

"Has there been a robbery committed?" asked the chief of police, as he examined the body.

"I know not," answered Rufus, "but as there is no evidence of confusion here, I do not think anything is missing."

"All the more easy to find out the murderer," said the officer. "There must be a motive!"

"Very true," said Mr. Houston, who had come at once on being summoned by Jarvey.

"We shall see, we shall see," reiterated the chief of police. "This is not a blind alley, leading nowhere. It strikes me that it will prove a very simple case."

"The coroner should be sent for at once," said the physician.

"True," said the officer.

"Jarvey, the doctor will give you the address; hasten for the coroner immediately," said Rufus.

"Any weapon left behind?" asked the officer.

"None that we have seen," replied Rufus.

"That is a peculiarly shaped wound, and was not made by a common weapon," the officer went on, as his experienced eye rested on the spot where the knife had entered.

"A broad-bladed knife, not a dagger," continued the physician, examining the wound.

"There was no struggle here," said the official; "it was one blow, and all was over."

"The clothes even have not been disturbed," said the doctor, examining them.

Consternation and confusion reigned in that stricken household for the next twenty-four hours, until its members could in some degree comprehend and analyze the strange and frightful event which had occurred. All the usual official examinations had been duly pursued, and detectives employed, but, notwithstanding their activity, all their ingenious theories came to naught, and thus far not the least clew even had been found to solve the mystery.

Suddenly, one day, as Rufus sat in his own room, preparing some memoranda at the request of the family lawyer, he was interrupted by the entrance of Jarvey in a partially intoxicated condition. The man seemed very rude, and had opened the door and entered without knocking first, in the usual manner. Looking up from his writing, Rufus saw at once the condition of the servant, and resolved when he was sober to pay him his wages and dismiss him from the house.

"Well, Jarvey, what do you want?"

"Want?" repeated the man, squinting vilely and winking. "I want money, Master Rufus."

"Money? Your wages are due at the end of the month, and will be promptly paid."

"No doubt of that, Master Rufus, but I want more," said the man, with his fingers on the side of his nose.

"You are insolent, Jarvey; you have been drinking too much—go about your business."

"There's a big reward offered for the discovery of the murderer of your father, Master Rufus."

"What has that to do with the matter?" said the young man, turning squarely around at him.

"A good deal."

"Are you sober enough to answer me?"

"Yes. If it is as much of an object for me to hold my tongue, why, I don't tell what I know, that's all. Don't you see, Master Rufus?"

"No. I don't see."

"Must be blind, then."

"You are a little too deep for me, Jarvey. Go and get sober; then, if you have anything to say, I'll talk with you."

"I'm sober enough."

"Not to talk to me," said Rufus, now getting a little angry.

"Oh, you needn't appear so innocent," said the insolent servant, advancing into the room.

"Jarvey, I shall do you an injury if you do not leave me at once," said his master.

"Master Rufus, I overheard that dispute between you and your father about Miss Eleanor, and I happen to be the one who can accordingly give the detectives the clew they talk so much about—the motive!"

"Motive?" repeated Rufus.

"Ay, that's the thing wanted," said Jarvey, insolently.

Rufus Bancroft looked at him for nearly a minute before he seemed to fairly comprehend what the man intended to insinuate. Then, as it flashed upon him, his anger and rage knew no bounds. He instantly knocked Jarvey down where he stood, and when he got up pounded him almost to a jelly, then absolutely threw him out of the room, and kicked him from the top to the bottom of the stairs, before he paused to take breath.

The servant was completely sober now, after the severe punishment he had received. He could hardly stand, as he turned and tried to find his way to the kitchen. His face was covered with blood, and one of his eyes was completely closed by the blows which Rufus had given him full in the face. The cook just at that moment made her appearance, and Rufus said:

"Take care of Jarvey; he's been misbehaving himself—send for the doctor, he will need him."

"Oh, mercy on us!" exclaimed the cook, as she saw Jarvey's bloody face, all swollen and blackened.

"Where is that knife you brought home from the Ingy Islands? You answer me that!" cried Jarvey, just as the cook took his arm to help him along.

At these words Rufus turned deadly pale.

CHAPTER V.

THE PARRICIDE.

Of course, Jarvey intended to trade upon the discovery which he had made. He thought he would have a bit of triumph over his young master, to begin with, at any rate, and so he approached him in the reckless way in which we have described, in consequence of which indiscretion there came very near being a second murder committed in that house. The soundly beaten servant was compelled to go to bed at once, for he was really in a critical situation.

As he lay in his bed, quite alone and suffering from his various bruises, his sole comfort was in the prospective revenge which he was planning within his own mind, as to the betrayal of his young master.

His first step, after getting up from his bed, was toward the office of the chief of police, to whom he was finally conducted and to whom he proceeded to make his business known.

The chief touched a bell, and, summoning an attendant, sent to another room for one of the detectives into whose hands this case had been given. The subordinate officer soon after made his appearance, listened to the charge brought by Jarvey, and then asked:

"What motive had the son to murder his father? That is the first step to be considered."

"That's just what I'm coming to," said Jarvey. "You see the old man threatened to alter his will."

"How do you know that Mr. Bancroft threatened to alter his will?"

"I overheard Rufus and his father quarreling about it one day in his study."

"Quarreling, eh?"

"Yes—almost came to blows."

"Ah!" said the detective, taking out his memorandum-book. "This looks like business."

Jarvey was then taken by appointment before the district attorney, afterward before the grand jury, which happened to be in session, and finally, all proper legal steps having been taken, a true bill was found against Rufus Bancroft, who was brought before the court on a charge of parricide, and after a preliminary examination was duly committed to prison.

In this great and trying emergency Eleanor Livingston came out in all the strength and vigor of her true character. She left nothing undone in behalf of Rufus' interests, taking the entire charge of his affairs outside the prison walls. She never for one moment believed the least shadow of guilt as charged against him, while the aspect, even in the judgment of his counsel, was very dark, indeed, as to the power of clearing him in the eyes of the law.

Since Rufus had been incarcerated in prison that fatal knife had been found, all covered with clotted blood, secreted under some loose bricks in the yard of the house, just beneath the room occupied as his chamber. When this fact was revealed to his lawyer, and it was rendered manifest that the murder had undoubtedly been committed with this knife, he frankly acknowledged that if he had not known Rufus from childhood, he should have thought the evidence was conclusive of his guilt. Of course, if this was the sentiment of his legal adviser, it is not to be wondered at that it was also the universal opinion of the public, and especially of the prosecuting attorney and the detective force engaged upon the case. The missing link of an incentive once supplied to the officials, they felt that it was an easy case thereafter, and that when the affair came to trial it would be made short work of by judge and jury.

Rufus Bancroft lay in prison week after week. The district attorney and the prisoner's lawyer were preparing themselves each to present his side of the case in the most favorable manner for their respective purposes.

As we have said, the guilt of the accused was almost universally admitted, for the terrible fact of the motive could not be lost sight of. Though almost entirely deserted by his former friends, still he was comparatively calm and collected. He was evidently much shattered by the force of events and the unnatural restraint of prison confinement, but otherwise he bore up with remarkable equanimity, and no one heard a word of complaint from his lips.

Rufus Bancroft had not failed to write to Inez Ariaton the very day of his imprisonment, detailing to her every item of his strange and trying experience since he had left her side. He even told her now the relationship existing between himself and Eleanor Livingston.

Let us look for a moment into that plantation home after the receipt of the intelligence concerning Rufus Bancroft.

Through the medium of the American newspapers, De Mena had got the news even before Inez had received her letter through Dr. Finley. He came to Buena Vista and discussed the matter secretly with Pedro, neither liking to be the first to break such unwelcome news to Donna Ariata or to Inez. De Mena could hardly hide his secret satisfaction at this condition of affairs; it seemed to be fortune playing right into his hands.

Guilty or not guilty, De Mena cared not a farthing, provided only that Rufus could be convicted, and rendered ineligible as a rival for the hand of Inez. All this was better than he could have planned, and quite elated him.

Dr. Finley, seeking a favorable moment, sat down with Inez, and broke the unpleasant intelligence to her. This he did so judiciously as to cause no hysterical exhibition on her part, and also in a manner to enable her to gather her faculties to meet the trying exigency.

"Do you believe the story of Rufus' guilt?" asked Inez of the doctor, when he had finished.

"No, I do not, though I have as yet no knowledge of the details in the case."

"Thank you, my good friend," said Inez, giving him her hand, "neither do I."

"That brave young fellow a parricide?" mused the doctor. "It cannot be. I will stake my life that he is innocent. Some strange complication—that's all."

"Rufus Bancroft is not a murderer," said Inez.

Inez was satisfied with declaring her conviction of his innocence, but said no more, and no one but Dr. Finley knew that she had received a letter from the accused. In his letter to her Rufus Bancroft had said:

"You will doubtless read the accounts given in the newspapers. All that I can answer is that I am innocent. Explanation I have none. With you this is, I trust, entirely unnecessary, but with the world at large, and especially with the courts and the law, I shall undoubtedly experience a difficult task."

Inez answered his letter briefly but sincerely, giving him all the assurance he could desire of her own loyalty and belief in his innocence, though she told him frankly that both the doctor and Pedro were confounded by the strong thread of circumstantial evidence which had been made public. With all the tenderness of her woman's heart she grieved that she was not with him to alleviate his trials, but hoping for the best, she should await his acquittal, when she knew he would hasten at once to Buena Vista.

CHAPTER VI.

IN PRISON.

While these scenes were occurring in that distant island of the Gulf, Rufus lay gloomily considering his singular vicissitudes in prison.

In the meantime he had received a kind and very encouraging letter from Mabel Reed. She wrote to him that she had read of his unfortunate and trying situation, and that, although the evidence against him, as printed, was so conclusive to the public mind, still she felt that she knew him too well not to be satisfied that he was innocent. She also wrote that, surrounded as he must be by his nearest relations and friends, it would, perhaps, seem to be a mere compliment to say how gladly she would come to him, if there was aught in which she could be of real service, for, she added:

"I know that you are very dear to one, who is, and must always be, very dear to me!"

It will thus be seen that Rufus Bancroft was not without some rays of light and hope, as he passed the weary hours in the cold and cheerless prison where he was incarcerated.

One day Mr. Houston called at the prison, and, after the usual ceremonies, he was admitted to an interview with his late partner's son. The merchant, whose figure was always a little stooping, seemed to be bent even more than usual, but came into the cell rubbing his large hands together and trying to assume a cheerful and easy air. This condition was so absolutely foreign to his nature that he, nevertheless, appeared very ill at ease before Rufus. He had a nervous mode of expression, and his eyes were very restless as he tried to speak pleasantly.

"Rufus, I want to speak to you confidentially," said Mr. Houston, drawing the rude stool closer to his side. "You must first promise me, however, upon your honor, that you will not betray the subject of which I speak."

"Had we not better avoid a subject which requires such singular secrecy?"

"It is solely in your interest," continued his visitor.

"Then I suppose I owe it to you to give the promise which you exact as to secrecy."

"It seems so to me."

"Well," said Rufus, after musing for a while with himself, "I promise you, then."

"In no way, nor under any circumstances, to betray what I am about to propose to you?"

"I promise you," repeated the prisoner.

"Well, then, in the first place, you must be patient, and hear what I have to say in the way of introduction. It refers wholly to your case as it is about to be brought before the court. Public opinion is entirely against you—the press has taken sides accordingly, and the very

atmosphere of the court, at the opening of your trial, will breathe of a verdict of guilty. The officials are of one mind—nay, do not interrupt me, I am only summing up the matter to present it to you as it is. Your counsel even despairs, as you doubtless know, of being able to secure a favorable verdict. In short, it appears to me, that for you to go to trial is simply to insure your legal conviction."

"What does all this tend to?"

"Prison walls have ears," said Mr. Houston, cautiously, drawing still nearer to Rufus. "It seems to me that we might be able to effect your escape?"

"Do you mean from prison?"

"Of course."

"Do you not see that would be a virtual confession of guilt?" asked Rufus.

"No."

"I do. Why, sir, I gave you credit for more shrewdness."

"I wished to save you."

"I do not doubt it."

"Everything is fair in love, law, and war—and your case, Rufus, is a very desperate one."

"At all events, Mr. Houston, let me thank you for your really disinterested kindness, for it certainly can be nothing else that brings you here with such a proposal, though I cannot entertain it for a moment."

"Headstrong as the devil," said Mr. Houston to himself, as he went out of the prison. "Well, I would have saved him if I could. Ah, Miss Livingston, going in to see Rufus? I've just had a half-hour with him. The poor boy looks sadly dejected. Anything I can do for you, my dear young lady?"

"Nothing, thank you," replied Eleanor, quietly, as she made her way toward the cell of her friend.

"Oh, Eleanor," said the inmate, taking her hand, "how glad I am to see you."

"Are you pretty well, Rufus?"

"As usual," he sighed.

And Eleanor sat down and talked cheerfully with him, calling his attention to some books she had brought, and discussed some business matters which she had been arranging for him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SENTENCE OF DEATH!

Time, with its noiseless feet, passed rapidly on, and the day for the trial of Rufus Bancroft, as a parricide, was fast approaching. Daily interviews were taking place between himself and his counsel touching the manner of defense. Mr. Hodgden, who filled the important post of lawyer for the prisoner, was a middle-aged man of great method and system in his profession, whose only fault, perhaps, was that he went so strictly by plummet and line; a man better calculated for a chamber lawyer, possibly, than to address a jury with effect. However, he had been the legal counselor of the Bancroft family for many years, and he was, therefore, the individual to whom Rufus naturally turned in the present grave emergency. It was on the day subsequent to the events related in the last chapter that Mr. Hodgden sat with his client, when he suddenly said:

"Have you ever thought it possible that Jarvey had any ill-will toward your father?"

"I have often thought about it," said Rufus; "but I cannot see why he should have."

"Ever heard of any quarrel?"

"Never."

"He is leading a very dissolute life, as I understand," continued the lawyer.

"Yes, he has a passion for drink," replied Rufus, "and is at heart a bad man, undoubtedly."

"He is capable of any crime."

"I fear so."

"And yet you can conceive of no theory which would point to his guilt in this case?"

"None whatever," said Rufus, frankly.

"Yet here we have a man inside the house, capable of crime, and we don't even suspect him."

"Do you not see what is wanting?" said Rufus, earnestly. "Do you not realize where the actual danger lies in my case? It is the one item—a motive! Jarvey could have no motive to kill his master; in fact, he had every reason to desire that he might live. If it were not that he had overheard that stormy interview between my father and myself, should I be here? Would any one have thought of charging Rufus Bancroft with being a parricide? I count the fact of the knife and its being secreted as nothing except in connection with the evidence of the motive."

"True, you state the case well," said Mr. Hodgden, "and up to this hour, with all my study and professional experience, I can find no good theory of defense, nothing where I can confidently take my stand. Yesterday I passed hours with your father's partner, Mr. Houston, recalling the habits of the deceased, his daily routine, everything, and thus striving to find some possible theory which should lead us to a form of defense, but all in vain."

"Did Houston have no suggestion?" asked Rufus, of course saying nothing as to his visit to him on the previous day, nor of the peculiar proposition which he advanced.

"Yes, Rufus, he did seem to have one, which, however, he announced with considerable hesitation. Indeed, you know he is a singular man at all times."

"True; but since my arrest his voluntary kindness to me has led me to overlook his personal peculiarities, as I could not do heretofore."

"Still I could never get on with him," said the lawyer, "he is too obsequious by half, too cringing, affects too much humility."

"What was his suggestion?" asked Rufus.

"He asked if you were at all addicted to restlessness at night—to somnambulism, in fact, or if you had ever been known to walk in your sleep?"

"Did he ask that?"

"He did."

"Then he had an object in it."

"Of course he did. He thought that it might form a good ground for defense."

"Sleep-walker," repeated Rufus, derisively.

"Well, we have got to settle upon some theory. For Heaven's sake, what shall it be?" asked the lawyer, almost in despair.

"Not somnambulism."

"Well, what then?" continued Mr. Hodgden.

"I cannot say. As I have already said, without a motive for such a deed, no man would have committed it. Had robbery been intended, we should have found that out at once. You, as a lawyer, must know the old axiom, 'No motive, no murder.' It seems that no one would profit by my father's murder but myself. Is it to be wondered at that the community universally think I am a parricide? That even you begin to doubt my—"

"Stop, Rufus," said the old family friend and lawyer. "I am thoroughly puzzled, but I do not believe you guilty, and yet I am frank enough to tell you, that had I not known you from childhood, my judgment would go with the popular current."

Mr. Hodgden was now summoned away by a messenger, and left his client without having yet settled upon any definite plan of action. On the following day he called at the Bancroft mansion, and sought an interview with Eleanor Livingston. After stating the condition of matters, he inquired of her if the theory of sleep-walking could be adduced with any corroborative evidence—whether she ever knew Rufus to be in any way inclined to somnambulism.

The startled girl turned pale, and, looking at the lawyer for a moment, asked, almost in a whisper:

"Mr. Hodgden, did Rufus Bancroft propose that idea to you as a theory of defense?"

"No, he did not."

"Thank Heaven for that!" said Eleanor Livingston, with a long breath.

"It was Mr. Houston."

"Ah!"

"With the best of motives."

"Doubtless."

"And, to tell you the truth, I thought a little favorably of the idea myself," said the lawyer.

"What, acknowledge Rufus to be guilty, and then try to palliate the guilt? Is that a suitable defense?"

"Well, my dear Miss Livingston, this is getting to be a desperate case."

"I know it."

"Everything seems against us, and, unless we can find and sustain some plausible theory, Rufus may be convicted, guilty or not guilty."

"Heaven help us!" said she.

"Ay, 'Heaven helps those who help themselves,' and that is just what I am striving to do."

"I know we can depend upon your doing your best," she said.

The day of the trial came at last. The court-room was, of course, crowded, for Rufus Bancroft was well-known personally, and had always lived among those who now thronged to see him tried for his life upon the charge of parricide. Jarvey was almost the only witness brought forward by the prosecution, except the ordinary accessories, to establish legally facts which were not disputed. The case was clearly opened before the court by the prosecuting attorney, in the usual manner.

Jarvey testified very clearly and fully touching the possession of the knife, its sudden disappearance, and its afterward being found secreted under the loose bricks in the house-yard. He also detailed very fully the conversation which he had overheard between Rufus and his father, emphasizing the quarrel a little, perhaps, but, in the main, giving a true relation of the affair—the threat to alter the will, the one week's delay, and, indeed, all that bore upon the subject, the whole evidence being very fairly and clearly elicited by the prosecuting attorney's questions.

Up to this time, it was not known to the defense as to what Mr. Houston, the former partner of Mr. Bancroft, had been called to testify to; but when he ascended the witness-stand, Rufus was surprised to hear him corroborate Jarvey's evidence as to the earnest character of the quarrel with the father, and especially those words relating to the will. He was surprised, because he knew very well that he had met Mr. Houston on that occasion at the foot of the stairs, where it would be an impossibility for him to hear a word which was spoken inside of his father's private apartment. In his testimony, he merely said that he arrived on the stairs, near the door of Mr. Bancroft's room, and heard the latter part of the conversation, which was given in a very loud and bitter voice, both parties being evidently very angry.

Mr. Hodgden, who had very carefully studied all the facts, instantly saw the incongruity of this evidence, and, turning to Rufus, spoke of it to him in a whisper. The latter merely said that he "did not see how Houston could testify thus, as he had just come into the house when he (Rufus) was coming out of his father's room, and that he met him at the foot of the stairs. Still, as it was a matter which the defense did not deny, he did not think it worth while to cross-examine Mr. Houston."

"Ah, but it may have some future and important bearing," said the lawyer.

"Do as you think best."

Mr. Houston was, therefore, called back to the witness-stand, and asked by Mr. Hodgden if he was sure that he did not meet Mr. Rufus Bancroft at the foot of the stairs.

"Quite so," he replied. "I met him at the head of the stairs as he opened his father's door."

This answer worried Rufus not a little, because he knew it to be incorrect; but Jarvey being recalled, at once corroborated the matter by saying to Mr. Hodgden's question that Mr. Houston was at the top of the stairs. What could this mean? The defense were themselves puzzled!

The defense commenced with an unqualified denial of the charge brought against the prisoner. It did not deny the alleged controversy between the father and son, but did deny that it could with propriety be called a quarrel. It went on to adduce the unquestionably good character of the accused from his very boyhood. It had no theory about the knife, except that whoever committed the deed had undoubtedly taken the weapon to throw the suspicion

of guilt upon the prisoner and avert it from themselves. Mr. Hodgden finally closed with an eloquent appeal to the jury; it was better, if there was a possible doubt in their minds, to err on the side of mercy, and he reminded them that they had only the rudest circumstantial evidence to found suspicion on against his client.

The judge summed up the evidence fairly and clearly, rehearsing the details as they bore upon the important features of the case. He charged the jury, explaining to them the law and their duty, and bade them retire and make up a verdict.

The court remained in session, and the crowd did not disperse. The jury had been out some three hours, when the foreman came in, accompanied by an officer, and requested some further instruction from the judge touching some question of law under which they were charged. This matter was considered, and the jury were once more dismissed to make up their final verdict.

Another hour elapsed, when the jury came in and the crier called for silence in the court. The judge asked:

"Do you find the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty!"

After this the court pronounced the sentence of death.

So ended this famous trial.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DETECTIVE.

Some five weeks had elapsed after the verdict of guilty had been found against Rufus Bancroft, when there appeared in the audience chamber of the Governor of Pennsylvania a lady closed veiled, and accompanied by a very dark-complexioned gentleman. She asked for a few moments' interview with the executive.

The Governor, entering, took a seat, and desired his visitors to do the same. The lady, drawing her chair near to the Governor's, threw back her veil and commenced to explain the object which had brought her there in a voice slightly tinged with a foreign accent, but in the purest English. In the meantime the Governor gazed into her face with an admiration which he could not disguise, for never had his eyes rested on more exquisite female beauty.

"May I ask your name, madam?"

"Inez Ariata," she replied.

"And this gentleman?"

"Is my cousin, Pedro Ariata."

"You are Spanish, I presume?"

"Cuban," she replied.

"And what so deeply interests you in the prisoner of whom you speak, this Rufus Bancroft?"

"He is my affianced husband," replied Inez, with a slight tremor in her voice and with downcast eyes.

"And you have come from Cuba to intercede for him?" continued the Governor.

"Yes."

"You ask for a reprieve of six months; why did you not crave his pardon?"

"Because in that time I believe that he will require none," was the reply.

"How so?"

"The real criminal will be found."

"Then you believe him innocent!"

"Most certainly."

"The man cannot be wholly bad who can inspire such devotion in one like yourself, madam," said the Governor, gallantly. "I cannot pardon without consulting with my legal counselors, but I can reprieve, and for your sake I will do so."

He at once summoned his secretary, and giving him the necessary orders, the proper papers were drawn and signed in duplicate, one set for official record and transmission to the proper authorities, the other for her own hands.

"Sir," said Inez, "I am very deeply indebted to you, who have rendered all so easy for me, and in so courteous a manner."

As she spoke she gave her hand to the Governor, who pressed it kindly, and expressed the hope that she might succeed in her self-imposed labors to the complete realization of her wishes.

Completely captivated by the refinement and exquisite

nature of her beauty, it seemed as though she might have demanded what she pleased with a certainty of success.

"By the by, madam, have you a permit to see the prisoner?"

"Not yet. I thought first to insure this reprieve, and then to seek for such an order in another quarter."

"It is a pleasure to serve you," he said.

A note was at once addressed to the sheriff, under the Governor's seal, directing admission to be granted to the bearer at all proper hours, and under the prison rules, to the cell of Rufus Bancroft. Thus Inez found her first efforts crowned with remarkable success.

Two hours subsequent to this interview, the door of Rufus Bancroft's prison cell was thrown open by the jailer, and its occupant was astonished and thrilled in every nerve by the presence of both Inez and Pedro. The former, disregarding all conventional proprieties, threw herself into his arms and sobbed like a child, while Pedro, with moistened eyes, seized and pressed earnestly the hand of his friend. Not a word was spoken for some minutes. At last Inez raised her face from his breast, and in a moment it brightened into smiles as she exhibited the copy of the reprieve.

"Your own doing!" he asked.

"Entirely," said Pedro; "and your polite Governor would have granted a pardon, I believe, if she had asked it."

"Ah! dearest, what does it all avail? I know not even if this be merciful, for it does but prolong my sad and fearful anticipations."

"No desponding, Rufus. I have come hither not to yield to circumstances, but to conquer them."

"Alas, that you should be so exposed for me!"

"Do you remember, Rufus, the long story that Dr. Finley told us one evening at Buena Vista, about a wonderful English detective?" asked Inez.

"Perfectly well."

"How he could ferret out anything, provided he could get the least clew to begin with?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, Rufus, we have sent for him, and he will arrive this week. With such a man in our interest, we will yet find the guilty party and set you free!"

As she had intimated, when the desperate character of Rufus' situation became known to Inez, she held long and earnest conferences with Dr. Finley, who was, as we have seen, a sort of father and confidant of the beautiful girl, and he had assisted her in the plan for securing the aid of the famous London detective. Inez had the control of any ordinary sum of ready money, and a draft of a hundred pounds, as a gratuity and fifty more, to cover expenses, accompanied by the necessary letters of explanation, soon brought a propitious reply from Mr. Bush, of Scotland Yard, London, stating that he would meet the parties desiring his services in Philadelphia on the date specified. As it happened to be a quiet time at home the detective found no trouble in obtaining the necessary leave of absence, and was promptly at hand as agreed. Inez and Pedro had taken rooms at a hotel, though they now had frequent interviews with Eleanor Livingston, to whom Inez at once made herself known, as well as the purpose in which she was engaged. Indeed, Eleanor had immediately affiliated with the beautiful Cuban, and did not wonder that her marvelous beauty should have captivated Rufus. In the pure unselfishness of her heart, she could even rejoice that he had chosen so well, for she realized, that lovely as Inez was, her character was equally beautiful with her exquisite form and features.

Mr. Bush first obtained permission to visit Rufus Bancroft in prison, and from him got every particular in the whole story, the fact about the knife, the truth about the reported quarrel between himself and his father, the connection of Jarvey with the case, and all about that servant's habits and associations. He was most particular in his inquiries as to the late Mr. Bancroft's habits, tastes, hours of meals, business habits, dress, everything. Many of his questions appeared to Rufus to be entirely irrelevant. The detective took no memoranda, made no written notes whatever, but not a word escaped him, while his bright little eyes sparkled like steel.

At the conclusion of the interview, Mr. Bush shook Rufus by the hand, with a bright and confident look, and passing out of the prison, went directly to the Bancroft mansion-house.

The English detective made himself known to Mrs. Hurd and Eleanor Livingston, who were of course ready to afford any and all possible information within their power.

Mr. Bush carefully examined the premises, especially Rufus' and Mr. Bancroft's chambers, the yard where the knife was secreted, the windows, the fastening of the front door, and the rear entrances. He went about the house as though he was quite at home, questioning the servants, and by permission, he slept in the late Mr. Bancroft's chamber one night.

Mr. Bush's next move was to hunt up Jarvey. This was not a difficult task. His habits had rendered him an almost constant dweller at one of the tap-rooms, near where he had secured lodgings. Here he was interviewed by the apparently uninterested Mr. Bush, who, being known to no one, easily assumed to be a mechanic out of work, and an ardent and eloquent advocate of the six-hour system, which was abbreviating the usual period of a day's labor beyond that of any reformer's plan that Jarvey had heard of.

It was astonishing how the ex-servant took to Mr. Bush, and over gin and sugar they swore eternal friendship, declaring their acquaintance to be a divine dispensation of "Providence." It required two or three days for the detective to reach this degree of confidence with Jarvey, but during that time, he had turned the man inside out, to use a professional term, and knew all that he could impart upon any desirable subject. One thing would have puzzled a less acute individual than Mr. Bush, and that was the profound conviction under which Jarvey rested that Rufus was the guilty party. The man insisted upon it, and believed it as firmly as he believed in his own existence.

Whatever work Mr. Bush did he did thoroughly. He had got all the information which Rufus could give him in a protracted interview, and not one word was lost. He had passed four or five days in the Bancroft mansion with the family and the servants. He had now got all the information possible out of Jarvey, and yet he had not been able, as he said himself, "to strike a light." The habits of life generally of the deceased were so singularly solitary that the officer was at a loss where to turn next.

He now changed his plan and his dress. The few acquaintances he had formed lost sight of him, and though the family had no doubt he was at work on the case, even Inez and Pedro knew not where he was. One day, however, they received a note, saying that he had thought it best to move in a more cautious manner, and for a while he should not appear in person at their quarters. That was all he wrote, giving no explanation of his plans.

One day at about this time there appeared a man at the business house of Bancroft & Houston, who requested to be engaged as a keeper in almost any department. Wages were of no consideration, until he had proved himself of value to his employers; he was poor, starving, in fact, was a stranger in a strange land, etc. The head man in the counting-room, at last, struck by his importunity, agreed to take him for a while on trial. The new hand was very industrious, a good stout laborer, intelligent and quick to understand, could write a fair hand, and soon obtained the good-will of all the clerks and helpers in the store. As he wrote well, he was often called into the counting-room to assist in cases of emergency, and he was thus brought in contact with the head of the firm, Mr. Houston. He was soon on excellent terms with the book-keeper, a man who had been in the position for a number of years. This individual was in humble circumstances. He was named Horace Stacy, was married, and had a young family about him.

The new-comer was known as Robert Barton. He soon got into the confidence of Horace Stacy, and used to visit his house evenings, bringing little inexpensive toys to the children, and making himself quite welcome in the family circle. Before three weeks of this intercourse had passed, Robert Barton was a boarder in the family at a moderate figure, and his situation at the store was bettered by

the advice of the book-keeper, who employed him as an assistant upon the books at various times. Barton was very smart at the books, and showed an aptness that surprised his friend Stacy.

"Though your firm is Bancroft & Houston," he said one day, "I never see any one representing the firm but Mr. Houston."

"No," said Stacy, "Mr. Bancroft is dead; did you never hear about that sad business?"

"What business?"

"Why, his murder?"

"Murder!"

"Yes."

"Who killed him?"

"His own son—think of that."

"Was it proved?"

"To the satisfaction of the jury, yes."

"Pretty hard case that," said Barton. "Did you know the other partner well?"

"Oh, yes; he was just about to settle up and leave the business. He used to come down to the store every day latterly."

"Sociable?"

"Yes; though during the last part of the time he was very much troubled and anxious."

"Oh, he was anxious and troubled about his business, was he?" asked Barton.

"Well, I don't know as I ought to say anything about it, as it would seem to reflect indirectly upon myself, but then there's no blame attaching to me, after all. You see, there is a discrepancy in our accounts of over a hundred thousand dollars, somewhere during the last ten years. My idea is that it must be the aggregate of several sums. Of course, it stands to reason it couldn't have all occurred at any one time."

"Do you mean that the assets show a deficit of that sum?" asked Barton.

"Yes; yet vouchers run in such a way as to balance the books, and there is the puzzle."

"This, you say, troubled Mr. Bancroft very much?"

"Yes; and he was going over the books with an expert, day by day, from the beginning of the partnership, determined to find the error, when he was suddenly taken away."

"Of course, you have gone on looking for the error, haven't you?" asked Barton.

"No, we haven't, queer to say," answered the book-keeper; "we have dropped the matter altogether."

"Is a hundred thousand dollars so small a sum as to be overlooked in the accounts of this firm?"

"Well, the house has done a very large business, but no house can afford to lose such a sum. Though, to tell you the truth, I don't believe it was lost, but that it is covered up somewhere by somebody."

"Queer!" said Barton.

This conversation took place at Stacy's house. It was very delicate ground for the book-keeper to trench upon, and he evidently seemed to think he had said too much. But still, being ingeniously led on, he even went further, and said he thought that Mr. Houston knew all about the matter, as he had never appeared very zealous about discovering the trouble with the accounts, except when Mr. Bancroft was present.

"Houston is rich, I suppose?" asked Barton, with the utmost indifference in his tone.

"Oh, yes; he is worth twice as much as Mr. Bancroft was, if not more."

"How's that? Did he rate more than equal partner?" continued Barton.

"No; but he was more saving. I think I never knew a man who liked money better."

"Any family?"

"Yes, a large one."

"Who was that expert of whom you spoke as examining the books?"

"Oh, that was a professional—Mr. Conant. He has a school and teaches book-keeping. But it seems to me you are very inquisitive; I should think I was on the stand in court and being cross-questioned."

"Funny idea," said Barton, laughing.

That very evening Barton called at Mr. Conant's school, and desired to enter a class in order to learn book-keeping, or, if the classes were too far advanced, would Mr. Conant give him private lessons, as he was anxious to make rapid progress. This was the master's business, so Barton was soon seated with Mr. Conant and following his directions patiently over a blank book. By the third evening Barton and his instructor were on the very best of terms and quite intimate. The new pupil, who seemed anxious to learn, was also excellent company; and after school hours they went together and had a social glass and a cigar at a neighboring restaurant, and chatted away like old comrades.

Conant soon found out where Barton was engaged, and told him voluntarily that he knew the house very well—that he had been employed not long since by the firm to examine their books, assisted by Mr. Bancroft personally. He also mentioned the fact of the senior partner's tragic death, which seemed to shock Mr. Barton very much, especially when he learned that his son had been the murderer.

"You finished up the books, of course?" asked Barton, puffing away at his cigar.

"No. After the senior partner died the other didn't seem to care about it."

"Was there a discrepancy in the books?"

"Yes, and a heavy one, too."

"How much?"

"Well, I don't know as it's any secret. I don't generally mention these things, but it was a very large amount."

"Did you find anything?" asked Barton, indifferently.

"Well, yes," said Mr. Conant, rather hesitatingly.

"Take another glass of hot whisky—I'm going to. It's cold to-night," said Barton.

"Well, I don't care if I do. Work is over, but I have to be careful and keep my hand steady."

"Oh, you were saying that you found something in the books of the firm," continued Barton, after they had both taken more whisky.

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Well, among the vouchers was one piece of paper which Mr. Bancroft examined very carefully, and I heard him say something to himself which he did not intend for my ear, as he took the paper and carefully folded it into his pocket-book. He carried it home with him that night."

"Odd, wasn't it?" said Barton.

"Very."

"Do you remember what day that was?"

"Yes, it was on Friday, the 15th of September. I remember it because it was the day before the murder!"

"And what was the word you overheard Mr. Bancroft make use of?"

"This must be between ourselves, you know," said Conant, who began to feel the effects of the hot whisky.

"Of course," said Barton.

Putting his mouth close to his companion's ear, Mr. Conant said:

"It was 'forgery!'"

CHAPTER IX.

LINKS IN THE CHAIN.

About this time Inez Ariata received the following brief note from her busy agent, the detective:

"DEAR MADAM:—I have at last struck light! Tell our friend in prison that he may be of good cheer. I can say no more at present, but let me request you to keep secret our affairs. A word might spoil all. Secrecy is easy and safe. Your servant, B."

Inez could hardly contain herself until she was able to communicate the purport of this note to Rufus. We need not depict the surprise and joy of the prisoner at this intelligence. Of course, it was not decisive of success, but he thought he knew Mr. Bush well enough to believe that he would not say even this little without strong and satisfactory reasons for doing so.

Of course, the reader has detected Mr. Bush in the person of Robert Barton, the clerk.

The next day, when Mr. Houston came rather earlier to his counting-room than usual, he found no one there except the new assistant, Robert Barton, who at once followed him into the back office, and said:

"Miss Livingston called after you left the store yesterday, and said she would thank you for the night-key of their door, as she had lost hers."

"Night-key?" said Mr. Houston, a little surprised. "What made her think I had one? It is my own key."

"Well, sir, I told the lady I would step around and hand it to her if you desired me to do so."

"It's of no use to me, so you may as well let her have it," and he went to his desk and opened it. He then handed the key to Barton. Suddenly seeming to remember himself, he said, hurriedly:

"Here, give that key back to me."

But the man did not, or pretended not to hear, and hurried rapidly away with the key, saying to himself:

"One link in the chain! Yes; I begin to see light."

"I ought not to have acknowledged having that key," said Mr. Houston to himself. "It may possibly lead to unpleasant inferences. How like the devil that fellow hurried away!"

He sat down thoughtfully in his little inner office and mused by himself for some time, until Robert Barton had returned to his post.

Mr. Houston seemed very absent-minded all that forenoon, so much so as to cause some remarks among his clerks, and he was watched with lynx eyes by Barton, who, without seeming to do so, scarcely had his eyes off him. Once or twice, when suddenly addressed on some question of correspondence or other business, he would start as though waking from a dream, and appear so confused as to require a repetition of the question before he could answer. Finally, he left business much earlier than usual on the plea of a severe headache.

About the middle of the afternoon, Barton called at Mr. Houston's house.

His summons at the door was answered by the man who served as a sort of lackey to the master of the house.

"Is your master busy?" asked Barton.

"He's not well."

"Ah, asleep?"

"Yes."

"Queer how some folks can sleep in the day-time," suggested Barton, carelessly, yet watching for every word that came from the lackey.

"Oh, master takes medicine to make him sleep!"

"Laudanum, perhaps?"

"That's it!"

"Well, I came from the store on business. I'm employed there, but if he's asleep I won't wake him. Laudanum—ugh! bad stuff! Has Mr. Houston been in the habit of taking much laudanum?"

"Never until lately; but he says he can't sleep without it, and he does take quantities. He sleeps all the time, day and night, when he's not at business."

"How long has he been inclined to sleep so much?"

"About three months."

"Ah, well! I'll tell them at the store that the business must wait until to-morrow. You needn't mention that I called, as he may think it was something quite important. It can very well lay over."

"Laudanum!—sleeps day and night! Another link in the chain!" said the detective, as he turned away.

Mr. Houston had of late contracted a habit of coming much earlier to his business than he had done for years past, and availing himself of this, Barton managed to be there also and to watch him. His duty kept him in and about the private offices, and he was thus enabled to observe the merchant's movements very closely. He found that Mr. Houston was evidently reviewing the vouchers for some years back, and on the second morning after the day he had called at his house, Barton, watching his opportunity when the merchant had his papers spread out before him, opened a window near his elbow, and let in so sudden a draft of wind as to blow them about the floor, then instantly closing the window, he hastened to apologize for the carelessness and to help pick up the papers. These he instantly restored to the table, with the

exception of one, which he slyly put into his pocket. It was an ordinary looking piece of paper, in the form of a draft, two small corners of which had been torn off, as though by the thumb and finger in pulling it out from some file of other bills or vouchers. It answered exactly to the piece of paper described by Conant as that taken away by Mr. Bancroft, except that the one he mentioned had one corner torn off, while this had two corners off; but it bore Mr. Bancroft's signature. Undoubtedly this was the very piece of paper which had elicited that startling word from Mr. Bancroft when he was examining the vouchers with the professional book-keeper.

How came it back again?

Barton turned away, to carefully secrete this important paper, and as he did so, said to himself:

"Another link in the chain!"

He got excused for an hour or two, and, hastening to the office of Mr. Hodgsden, the attorney, he was closeted with that gentleman half the forenoon, "working up the case," to use a technical term.

"You took possession of Mr. Bancroft's effects?" asked the detective.

"Yes," replied the lawyer.

"His pocket-book?"

"Of course."

"Did you examine the pocket book carefully?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Have you still got it?"

"Yes, here it is," continued the lawyer, taking it out from his safe, "contents and all, except that I took out the money, some hundred dollars and more, and deposited it to the credit of the estate."

The detective took the pocket-book and examined it very carefully, taking out a few trifling memoranda which it contained, and emptying all upon the table. As he did so one small piece of paper fell among the rest, not larger in size than a postage-stamp. When Mr. Bush saw that minute piece of paper, his little eyes opened to their biggest capacity. He turned to Mr. Hodgsden, and called the lawyer's attention to the scrap, and said:

"Hand me, if you please, the draft I brought to you just now."

The detective received it, and, placing the draft upon the table, found this scrap exactly fitted the torn place on the right-hand corner, and by examining both with a microscope, which he took from his pocket, he also found that the grain and quality of the paper were identical with that of the draft! The two men looked at each other significantly for a moment, when the detective said:

"Another link in the chain!"

"Providence is certainly with us this time," said Mr. Hodgsden, in astonishment at the accumulating facts. "How strange that we never thought to trace out his business affairs. But then who in the world that knew the concern would have suspected Mr. Houston! Why, he was always looked upon as a model of Christian virtue."

It was as clear as the daylight, that Mr. Bancroft had taken that draft home with him on the afternoon of the 15th of September, and that it was in his pocket-book when he was murdered; it was equally clear that it had been extracted from thence and conveyed back to the pile of vouchers of the business firm. As Rufus had nothing whatever to do with the business, had never been an hour in the counting-room of the store altogether in his life, as he had not been there at all since his return from Cuba, he could not be the individual who conveyed that draft back again. Mr. Houston kept the keys of the safe where those vouchers were filed, hence there was but one inference to be drawn from these several facts.

Mr. Bancroft had pronounced the draft, which was for some seven thousand dollars, to be a forgery. If one draft had thus been paid out on what proved to be a forged signature, undoubtedly the whole deficit of one hundred thousand dollars and more could be accounted for in the same way. As the book-keeper, Stacy, had said, it was no single error, but the aggregation of many amounts which probably made up the large deficit. By placing one fact with another, the mystery was solving itself. It was apparent that Mr. Houston had no desire to ferret out the error in the accounts, as he had at once dropped the

investigation at the time of Mr. Bancroft's murder. These vouchers, filed in past years, suddenly seemed to possess remarkable interest for Mr. Houston, who came down unusually early to business to work out and put them into such order as answered his own purpose. Specimens of his handwriting had been secured by the detective, and there was, on comparison, a strong likeness between his *o* and *t* in his signature, and that which Mr. Bancroft had pronounced a forgery.

"I do not like to shout before I am out of the woods," said Mr. Bush, "but I am satisfied that Mr. Bancroft will be out of prison within a fortnight, and that Mr. Houston will change places with him."

"Facts point that way."

"Decidedly."

"We have now found, I must confess," said Mr. Hodgden, "the motive for the murder, which was the great stumbling-block in the defense of Rufus Bancroft. Houston was well aware of that quarrel between Rufus and his father, and now I think of it, he testified to overhearing some important portion of it, but which Rufus said he could not have done. That was a piece of false testimony almost needless, as we did not deny the matter at all. It did, however, strengthen the case in the eyes of the jury, no doubt. Bless my soul, now I think of it, what an accomplished villain the man was to get that knife from Rufus Bancroft's room, and thus completely divert attention from himself. If Rufus had suffered for his crime, it would have been a double murder on his part."

"Let us keep quiet for a little longer," said Mr. Bush; "there is one piece of evidence still wanting, which I hope to secure, perhaps this very night."

"What is it?"

"Excuse me," was the answer; "no want of confidence, but I keep my purpose to myself always."

"Well, as a rule, I think you are right."

"Experience has taught me so."

"Very well. I am satisfied."

"Please keep this precious bit of paper," said the detective. "It is small, but very important."

"I will preserve it carefully."

That night, at about one o'clock, Mr. Bush might have been seen leaning against a street lamp-post, at a point very nearly opposite to the Bancroft mansion, where, after a while, he was joined by a police patrolman. They evidently knew each other, and, indeed, it could be seen that they met by appointment. Both looked about for a moment to see that they were not observed.

"You are prompt," said the detective.

"Yes, that's my style; you said at one o'clock, and here I am," was the reply.

"Well, have you thought that matter over, and fixed the date so that you can swear to it?"

"Yes; and, after I came to look about me, it was a very easy matter. You will laugh when I tell you how I fix the date. I wonder I didn't think of it before."

"Well, how is it? what was the date?"

"You see, when I told you that I met Mr. Houston one night, and that he was hurrying so fast that I stopped him, and asked what he was doing out so late, and he told me that his family was sick, and he was out for a doctor, I forgot all about what had happened at my own home about the same hour."

"What was it?"

"Why, our little Charlie was born that morning. My wife called him Charlie after her brother."

"Oh, did she?" said the patient Mr. Bush. "Her brother appreciated the compliment, I trust."

"That was Saturday morning, the 16th of September, about two o'clock," said the patrolman; "but you haven't told me what you want to find out so particularly for."

"A business matter," replied Mr. Bush. "I told you if you would think the subject over and fix the date correctly, I would hand you a ten-dollar bill. There it is."

"It's pretty easily earned," said the patrolman; "but a bargain's a bargain, and I thank you."

"Shall we repeat that dose of 'medicine' we took around the corner the other night?" asked the detective.

"I don't mind if I take a single glass," was the answer.

So the detective and his witness repaired to a quiet bar

near by, where they took a social glass together, and after a brief chat separated. Then the ingenious Mr. Bush said to himself:

"Another link in the chain!"

CHAPTER X.

THE ASSASSIN!

Matters had been kept very quiet by the detective and the prisoner's friends. The public suspected nothing of the industrious efforts being made in his behalf, and that of justice.

Mr. Bush was a very reticent man, except when it was necessary to talk, and then he spoke to the purpose. In company with Mr. Hodgden, he now appeared before the grand jury, and after a few hours of patient hearing, a true bill was found against Mr. Houston for the murder of his former partner, Mr. Bancroft, and a warrant was issued and placed in the sheriff's hands for his immediate arrest.

So perfect was the array of evidence as presented that it carried conviction on its very face, and no difficulty was found in pressing through the papers necessary to procure the release of Rufus Bancroft, though he was still placed under heavy bonds in case he should be wanted.

Mr. Bush accompanied the sheriff when he went to arrest Mr. Houston in his own counting-room; and as they entered together, Robert Barton, as he was known in that establishment, introduced his companion.

"This is Mr. Hammond, Mr. Houston, the sheriff of this city and county."

"Hammond? Sheriff?" repeated the startled man, turning as white as a sheet.

"Yes," replied the officer. "Shall I read you the warrant under which I have come to arrest you?"

"Arrest me? For what?" asked the trembling merchant, as he in vain attempted to stand upon his feet.

"For the murder of the late Herman Bancroft, the senior partner of this house."

The startled man now found strength to rise from the chair in which he was sitting, and hastily taking from his pocket a vial, extracted the cork, and had got it nearly to his lips, when the active Mr. Bush grasped his hand and took it from him. He picked up the cork and secured the contents of the vial, while the sheriff quietly but firmly placed a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of his desperate prisoner.

"Attempted suicide!" said the sheriff.

"The last link in the chain!" said Mr. Bush.

The reunion which took place at the Bancroft mansion when Rufus was released from prison, can better be imagined than described. There were Inez, Pedro, Eleanor, Mabel Reed, Mrs. Hurd, Mr. Hodgden, and Mr. Bush—the latter with his little, steel-bright eyes sparkling with satisfaction at the tableau which he witnessed, and which he might congratulate himself as having brought about.

It was just as twilight set in that Inez, Eleanor, and Rufus, accompanied by Mabel and Pedro, were preparing for a pleasant walk, the two first falling to Rufus' share to escort, very naturally, and Pedro taking Mabel upon his arm. As they were passing out of the front door of the Bancroft mansion, Pedro took up a cane, which stood among the usual deposits of an entry umbrella and hat-rack, saying, carelessly, as he did so:

"Here, Rufus, as you have got two such precious burdens to defend, you ought to have a cane—take it."

Rufus took the heavy stick as carelessly as it was offered. It had been his father's, and in daily use up to the time of the tragedy of his death. With Inez and Eleanor, one on either arm, he strolled away to the nearest park. They were a very happy group, these five friends, little heeding the secret danger which was impending.

After sitting under the shade of the trees, watching the stars come out and a young moon rise and light up the scene with a silvery beauty, they had turned their steps once more homeward, and had come within a few rods of the Bancroft mansion, when there suddenly darted from across the street the figure of a man wrapped in a cloak.

The individual approached Rufus from behind, and,

lifting his arm without uttering a word, struck at his throat with a glittering steel blade.

Abruptly as he had made his appearance, and swiftly as he had struck the blow, the eyes of Eleanor Livingston had been quicker, and dropping her escort's arm, she had thrown herself in an instant between him and that glittering steel, the blade of which entered her own bosom!

Rufus Bancroft was extremely prompt in an exigency, and he had turned as quick as thought before that arm now again uplifted could descend to strike at his life, and with the heavy cane which he held, brought down with all his strength a blow just back of the ear of the assailant, who dropped like a stone upon the sidewalk, dead.

The whole struggle had not occupied sixty seconds, but a startled cry from Inez, and Pedro and Mabel rushing to the spot, attracted the attention of passers-by, and a policeman instantly joined the group. Poor Eleanor, weltering in her blood and insensible, was taken in the arms of Rufus and Pedro, and carried at once to the house, while the officer, who had summoned assistance, took charge of the assassin.

By this time a wagon had been procured and the body of the assassin was carried to the nearest police-station. After seeing that he was in charge of the police, Rufus was too anxious about Eleanor to pay further attention to the villain who had wounded her. He knew very well, though he knew not why, that the fatal blow was intended for his own life. The almost instant arrival of a medical man only served to confirm their most anxious fears, for a very brief examination showed that the wound was fatal. It was in the immediate region of the heart, though it had not reached that organ, otherwise death would have ensued almost instantaneously.

"Oh, Heaven!" said Rufus, in a half-groan, turning to the physician, "can nothing be done to save her?"

"Nothing."

"Eleanor, dear Eleanor," said Rufus, leaning over her, the words seeming to arouse her, "have you much pain?" and he pressed his lips tenderly to her forehead.

"Rufus, dear Rufus!" she whispered.

"You received the blow that was meant for me."

"It is very sweet to die for those we love!" she said, in a voice so low that he alone could hear it.

"Dear, dear Eleanor, will you forgive me?"

"Everything. Rufus, kiss me!"

He leaned over her and pressed his lips to her own, tenderly—lingeringly. It was the last kiss. She breathed no more.

CHAPTER XI.

COMPENSATION.

Rufus and Pedro were summoned before the coroner to testify in relation to the assassin's death, and neither could at first recall to whom those features had belonged in life, the face had so changed since they knew it; but Pedro was the first to discover that these mortal remains were all that was left of his old playmate and friend, Antonio De Mena! Maddened by liquor, loss of fortune, and disappointment in love, he had determined to avenge himself upon the man to whose charge he laid all the misfortunes which had befallen him. He left his home and followed Inez and Pedro to their present residence, and soon found an opportunity to attack Rufus, as we have seen, losing his own life in the attempt.

The public had been already informed of the singular turn affairs had taken in the famous Bancroft case, and there were plenty of people who now came forward and said that they had never believed Rufus to be guilty. The bitterness against Mr. Houston was such that a mob could have been readily collected to lynch him and take his life without a judge or jury. But it was not needed that man should interfere at all to punish the dishonest merchant. He had suffered the torments of the damned since that awful night when he stole into the sleeping man's chamber and stabbed him to the heart, in order to avoid the exposure which he saw was about to take place.

To obtain forgetfulness and sleep he had taken such large quantities of narcotics that his intellect had become affected, and in one week from the time of his incarceration in prison he died of congestion of the brain. In the few lucid moments which he experienced before his

death, he confessed his guilt to the prison chaplain, putting all possible doubt forever at rest.

At this stage of affairs Mr. Bush called upon Inez, and said that as he was no longer required in the matter he felt the necessity of returning to England. Being asked how much his bill of service would be, he handed a modest one to the lady, who simply doubled the amount, and with her hearty thanks, joined to those of Rufus, the detective took his leave of them, with mutual good wishes.

The affairs of Bancroft & Houston were placed in the hands of Mr. Hodgsden, by the consent of all concerned, and on being settled fairly, left an ample fortune to be divided between Rufus and his half-sister, Mrs. Hurd.

Inez and Pedro now prepared to return to Cuba, and it was mutually agreed that the relationship between them and Rufus should remain for a few months as was the case before the occurrence of those strange and trying experiences, when Rufus promised to come once more to Buena Vista. Rufus and Mabel went to New York and saw their dear friends embark for their island home.

Perhaps William Jarvey, the lackey, was one of the most astonished persons among the general public, as he regarded the facts of the Bancroft murder, when it came fully to be known who the guilty party really was. It seemed so utterly impossible to him to realize that it was not Rufus, but his old master's partner who committed the terrible crime, that he could never cease to wonder about it, and constantly referred to the subject in his tipsy hours.

The De Mena estate had been offered for sale since its master's death in a foreign land, and by Dr. Finley's advice Pedro purchased it. He at once set about putting it in exquisite order, intending when all was done to bring home a bride to make for him a new and happy home. His mother had glided out of life, as it were, and her death had been so gradual, and quiet, and painless, as to be robbed of half the shock that such an event generally cause.

Rufus Bancroft, who had been so shocked at the death of Eleanor Livingston, besides having been worn by severe trials, felt that he required distraction of thoughts and change of scene to enable him to recuperate. So he crossed the Atlantic and sought among the classic scenes of Europe for recreation of body and mind. All the time his letters were received with delight by Inez, who, indeed, had suggested this foreign trip for him she loved so well. She knew how keenly he felt the loss of Eleanor, and especially on account of the sacrifice of her life for his own. She could sympathize with him in the matter. If he had not exhibited, as he did, such tender regard for her memory, Inez would have loved him less.

In the meantime Pedro and Mabel were also in correspondence, and as the one great obstacle of Donna Ariata's objections was now removed, Mabel had less to say about delay in response to Pedro's ardent communications, until finally one spring day she wrote to him:

"Come and take me!"

Pedro required no second bidding, and when he came to Boston he found that Rufus had returned from abroad, and was preparing to act as his groomsman at the wedding, and, more than that, he would return with them, when they were ready, to Cuba.

Rufus Bancroft and Inez Ariata were united in marriage in the church of San Philippe, at Havana, and a happy home is that at Buena Vista, where the tropical winters are passed and varied during the heat of summer by an annual return to the North. Pedro and Rufus are neighbors and firm friends, while Inez and Mabel are loving and gentle, as they are beautiful; their firmest friend and counselor is still the good and genial Scotch physician.

[THE END.]

"TELEGRAPH TOM'S TRAP," by Charles Norris, will be published in the next number (108) of THE NUGGET LIBRARY.

ONE OF THE LATEST COMIC SONGS.

DROP A NICKEL IN THE SLOT.

Written and Sung by James Dunn.



The latest craze that puzzles 'em is well known to you all,

'Tis seen at ferries, stations, and at every public hall;

In bar-rooms, streets, and avenues, and every public spot,

This machine, I believe, the name is: Drop a nickel in
the slot.

It produces almost anything, that any one desires,

As long as money drops inside the machinery never
tires;

You may have seen it long ago, perhaps you may have
not:

This wonderful thing and they call it: Drop a nickel in the
slot.

Then drop a nickel in the slot, and judge of your surprise,
An article jumps out, and you can scarce believe your
eyes;

There's cigarettes of all kinds, and chewing-gum, as well,
Just drop a nickel in the slot, what you'll get none can
tell.

There's tobacco, candy, undershirts, suspenders, too, and
socks,

Clothing new and second hand, and pills, too, by the box;

Whisky punches and free lunches, freezing cold or hot;

No trouble to get, if you'll only drop a nickel in the slot.

Then drop a nickel in the slot and see what will come next,
If you don't get a house and lot you must not then get
vexed;

There's castor oil and bathing suits, and bustles, too, they
say,

Just drop a nickel in the slot and the band begins to play.

Just drop a nickel in the slot if you want a loving wife,

She'll be a comfort to you for the balance of your life;

And if you're fond of dressing, and very little money
you've got;

If you want a suit of clothes, drop a nickel in the slot.

